TIME
Approved For Release 2000/08/26 : CIA-RDP75-00149R000200180006-8
SEP 23 1966

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The Snakes & the Angel

Of the 87 Americans taken prisoner since the Viet Nam war began, only three have managed to escape.* The problem is not so much one of harsh prison security, as it was for flyers downed by the Nazis during World War II. Rather, it is the harshness of the country itself. An escapee from a Southeast Asian prison camp must burrow through rotting rain forests, fight off swarms of bugs, swim mighty, mud-thick rivers that cut between the region's steep mountains, and find a way to signal the U.S. rescue planes that orbit high over the jungle. Last week the most recent escapee told a harrowing tale of his trudge back to freedom.

Ants & Water Buffalo. U.S. Navy Pilot Dieter Dengler, 28, was shot down over the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos last Feb. 1. Stunned by a crash landing that sheared the wings and tail from his Skyraider, Dengler stepped bleary-eyed into a world of muck, vines and violence that stood in odd contrast to his tidy, air-conditioned stateroom on the carrier *Ranger*. Abandoning his radio, .38-cal. pistol and dehydrated rations, Dengler ducked into the bush—but was jumped by Communist Pathet Lao guerrillas.

Dengler was marched at the double along jungle trails and staked out among mosquitoes at night with arms and legs wide apart; when he refused to sign a statement condemning the U.S. in Viet Nam, his captors tied him upside down from a tree and let ants swarm over him. Then they dragged him into unconsciousness behind a water buffalo.

Laotian Roulette. When he came to, his guards amused themselves with Laotian roulette: "I was tied to a tree and used for target practice—the guards tried to see how close they could come to hitting me." Finally, three weeks after his crash, Dengler was led into a bamboo stockade somewhere near the trail and locked up in crude, wooden "footcuffs" with six other U.S. flyers. The prisoners were fed a handful of rice twice a week, supplemented their diet with snakes and anything else that crawled through their hut. "Once," Dengler recalled, "we caught a snake that had swallowed two rats. We cut it open and ate the rats. Then we ate the snake."

Escape was constantly on Dengler's mind, but the prisoners decided to wait until monsoons had swollen the streams and rivers down which they hoped to float. On June 29 they made their break. Dengler slipped his footcuffs, grabbed four rifles and a bag of rice while the guards were eating. The prisoners killed six of their captors in a flurried firefight, then split into pairs in hopes of making their escape route difficult to follow.

Loaded with Death. Dengler's teammate was Air Force Lieut. Duane Martin, 26, of Denver, whose rescue helicopter had been shot down in September 1965. Twice the pair slept in abandoned villages; then they built a raft and floated downstream until an unexpected waterfall smashed their craft. They came upon a third village that appeared abandoned: it was instead loaded with death. A man sprang from a hut and hit Martin on the leg with a machete; a second swipe hit the stumbling Air Force pilot between shoulders and neck, beheading him. Dengler fled back into the bush.

Starving and stupefied (he lost 59 lbs. during his imprisonment), he wandered on through the jungle. "I was hungry and nearly out of my mind," he said. "But I was angry. I wanted to come home, to fly again, but mostly to open my own restaurant." Finally, Dengler found an abandoned parachute, tore its panels into strips to form a crude SOS, and on July 20, a full 22 days after he had entered the jungle, he was picked up by a "Jolly Green" rescue helicopter. "That angel was a beautiful sight," said Dengler last week. "I was so far gone that I didn't believe it was real until I smelled the gasoline from the chopper."

Alive & Free. When the news of his escape broke in the world press, the Russians thought they smelled something else: a propaganda coup. Dengler was born in the West German town of Calw, the son of a Luftwaffe pilot who died in World War II. Although he emigrated to the U.S. in 1957 and became a citizen three years later, Dengler was carrying a West German passport when the Reds picked him up. The passport, he said, was meant to explain his slight German accent to his captors. Moscow quickly pounced on the fact to claim that West German "mercenaries" were fighting with the U.S. forces in Viet Nam.

Last week, as Dengler told his story to a jammed press conference in San Diego, West German Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder was explaining to a skeptical Bundestag that all U.S. immigrants are subject to the draft if they hope to achieve citizenship, and that the Russian claim was sheer claptrap. Dengler could not have cared less. Said he: "Man, it's great to be alive—alive and free."

* Five have died in captivity, five others were released, and many of the 303 Americans listed as "missing in action" are probably in Communist hands.

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